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AUTHOR Schwartz, Lita Linzer
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ABSTRACT

The author identifies a need for educational psychologists to become involved in interdisciplinary research and practice, explains why this is necessary, and suggests ways of applying their knowledge and skills in other fields. Three major reasons for interdisciplinary activitiy are (1) educational psychologists have research skills and psychological knowledge to offer colleagues in other fields, (2) they can gain new insights from professionals in other fields, and (3) they can provide services and expertise to colleges of education which are being asked to justify their reasons for existence in the face of an overabundance of teachers. The author describes three situations in which she has become involved personally in interdisciplinary activities. She has helped college mathematics professors to identify and correct negative attitudes and low competence in basic math exhibited by elementary education majors; she is working with an English professor and a developmental reading specialist to evaluate the K-12 language arts program in a local school district; and she has studied immigrant history in terms of public schools' effects on immigrant children's self concept. Additional interdisciplinary ventures are suggested in the areas of biology, medicine, law, economics, and remedial or developmental programs. (Author/AV)

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Learning With Each Other

Lita Linzer Schwartz

Pennsylvania State University, Ogontz Campus

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LEARNING WITH EACH OTHER

Lita Linzer Schwartz
Pennsylvania State University, Ogontz Campus

Educational psychologists, particularly those within the Special Interest Group, have spent several years trying to define the parameters of their field for themselves, and then to defend their definitions to others. This has resulted in excessive inward-looking, or introspective behavior. The objective of this symposium is to propose a change in the direction of our behavior. Instead of looking inward, it is proposed that we educational psychologists look outward and expand our roles inside and outside of the university. It is time for academicians to overcome their resistance to variegated applications in the field, and to join more practice-oriented clinicians in new ventures and colleagues in other disciplines in mutual learning adventures.

The reasons underlying this proposal are manifold, but a few stand out. First, we have many talents to offer our colleagues in other fields, related as well as non-related. Second, we can learn from our colleagues and broaden our own perspectives. Third, colleges of education are being forced to justify their reasons for existence in the face of an over-abundance of teachers. The services and expertise we can provide are one basis for such justification.

A bit of what so many of us preach about the virtues of divergent thinking and brainstorming can be brought to bear on the problem posed by this proposal. First of all, what is the problem? To me, the question is - In what ways can educational psychologists expand their roles in different directions?

Second, what talents, skills, abilities, and information do we have available to us with which to solve this problem? After all our introspective efforts, we should have many answers to the latter question. One of the skills we have learned, for example, is how to do research. In what ways can we turn this skill

to advantage beyond the parameters of our own field? The information we have, as a second example, touches on several aspects of psychology - attitudes, motivation, self-esteem, development, and so on - that can be interwoven effectively with other academic disciplines as well as in situations beyond ivy-covered walls. I will return to this point shortly.

Third, I propose that we hold a brief brainstorming session right now. In what directions can educational psychologists move? Name a field! Any field ...

Fourth, can we verify the validity of any of these suggestions? This takes us back to the second question, which I will now try to answer through experience.

I have asserted that we have professional skills and knowledge with which we can assist many of our colleagues with their problems. Let me give some examples first from my own experience and then offer possibilities for other fields and situations.

1.Mathematics - Two mathematics professors and I, after being appalled at the negative attitudes toward numbers and low level of competence in basic math exhibited by elementary education majors at our campus, attempted to modify the situation. After some preliminary unfunded skirmishes, we obtained a USOE grant for more formal efforts. Together we developed and field-tested a diagnostic scale following the research procedures familiar to us all. Knowing the content of elementary mathematics curricula these students would eventually teach was also a joint task. Finding an appropriate attitude scale and working out the relationships between attitude and competence, as well as exploring the relevant literature, fell within my province. My colleagues ran remedial clinics, and administered pre- and post-tests to their students. Drawing conclusions from our efforts was again a joint endeavor.

2.English - An English professor, a developmental reading specialist, and I are presently functioning as a consulting team to evaluate the K-12 language arts program in a local school district. Our tasks are to determine whether the objectives of the program are clear and whether they are being met. After multiple field observations, we will report our findings to the school administrators, and offer any needed suggestions for improvement.

3 History - For the past 3 years, a colleague in history and I have studied immigrant history with respect to the effects of the public schools on immigrant children's self-concepts and self-esteem. Implications of current practices for children of various ethnic groups today are also part of this study. Yet another aspect of the project deals with the shaping of children's attitudes toward people different from themselves and how this can be approached through a multi-cultural format in elementary schools. As a result of this study, we team-taught a course in cultural pluralism this past winter, and expect to co-teach a workshop for in-service teachers and other professionals this coming summer, both under the aegis of the history department. I might add that we have both learned a great deal in each other's field.

Remaining within the college walls, let me suggest some additional inter-disciplinary ventures:

1.Biology -

a.developing alternate presentations of content for science and non-science students, in consideration of their differing attitudes and motivations in this field;

b.Developing desensitization techniques for squeamish laboratory students about to undertake dissections and other experiments.

2.Medicine - Sharing motivational techniques with medical and nursing students so that they can be better prepared to aid their patients in rehabilitation efforts.

3.Law - Translations of laws affecting higher education with regard to their effects on faculty, students, and the learning situation itself (e.g., Title IX, Buckley Amendment, admissions policies).

4.Remedial or developmental programs - Applications of learning theory to special reading and writing programs at the college level.

5.Economics - Developing a sequence of economics modules appropriate to the comprehension abilities of students of different abilities and preparation.

In the field, there are many opportunities for consulting or trouble-shooting. We can bring psychological insights to bear on personnel policies and/or effects of financial problems in a variety of educational institutions. A particularly useful and appropriate role for the educational psychologist is on a team with psychotherapists and special educators, acting as intermediary to mesh clinical prescriptions and classroom practices. I am aware of a situation where such a role is vital but not filled. The therapist has diretted that no pressure be placed on his young client, who is then indolent in class. This frustrates the teacher whose job it is to encourage the youngster to want to learn. The competencées of an educational psychologist might meet the needs of both professionals, and, more importantly, those of the student involved.

Similarly, we can work with social workers or home and school visitors by communicating our knowledge of attitudes toward authority figures, education, and self-concept in differing socio-economic and cultural groups. Or, we can

help doctors to interpret hospital procedures to children in ways appropriate to their ability to comprehend. Our knowledge of Bruner's and Piaget's theories can assist authors of textbooks to pitch academic content to developmental stages with greater effect, especially at the elementary level.

With these varied suggestions as starters, you can certainly find applications to your own interests and competencies. Remember, too, to use your less academic talents - photography, art, crafts, sports - in combination with your professional expertise. Frequently you can make the desired point more effectively through these talents than through technical jargon.

To summarize, what is proposed here is that one new direction that educational psychologists might take is toward interdisciplinary research and practice. Apart from the challenges such a move brings, and the opportunities to learn something new or to be creative with something old, this new direction is also a step in the interest of preservation of our species.

Thank you.